

Message Text

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USINT BAGHDAD POUCH
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 KUWAIT 5419

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV, PINT, KU
SUBJECT: KUWAITI POLITICAL STABILITY: A NOTEWORTHY
ANNIVERSARY

REF: (A) 76 KUWAIT 4990, (B) KUWAIT 1093, (C) KUWAIT
5344.

1. SUMMARY. OVER A YEAR HAS PASSED SINCE THE AMIR OF
KUWAIT DISSOLVED THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, SUSPENDED SOME
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CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS, AND CURBED PRESS FREEDOM.
POLITICAL "AFTERSHOCKS" HAVE OCCURRED OCCASIONALLY, THOUGH
AT A DECREASING RATE. LABOR LEADERS WERE ARRESTED, A NUMBER
OF NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES WERE REPRIMANDED OR
TEMPORARILY SHUT DOWN -- THE KUWAIT WORKERS CONFEDERATION
MAGAZINE WAS SUSPENDED LAST WEEK. ALSO THE LEADERS OF
SEVERAL PROFESSIONAL GROUPS WERE REMOVED AND REPLACE, THE

PRINCIPAL LEFTIST POLITICAL CLUB WAS ABOLISHED, AND THE GOK HAS DEVELOPED NEW PROCEDURES TO SCREEN KUWAITIS INVOLVED IN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES AS WELL AS RECIPIENTS OF FOREIGN SCHOLARSHIPS. IN OUR ESTIMATION, THE RULING AL-SABAH FAMILY AND THE GOVERNMENT IT DOMINATES REMAIN AS STRONG AS BEFORE THESE STEPS WERE TAKEN, OWING LARGELY TO THE PUBLIC POLITICAL APATHY, THE RELAXATION OF INTERNAL TENSIONS OVER THE LEBANESE CONFLICT, AND A NUMBER OF OTHER DOMESTIC FACTORS. WHILE A SMALL MINORITY OF KUWAITIS MAY REALLY WELCOME THE PRELIMINARY MOVEMENT BACK TOWARD CONSTITUTIONALITY, QUESTIONING WHETHER SO FIRM A GOVERNMENTAL HAD WAS REQUIRED LAST YEAR, THE LARGE MAJORITY SEEM BASICALLY UNINTERESTED IN POLITICS, AND TRUSTING IN THE AL-SABAHS TO PROTECT THEIR INTERESTS. MOST KUWAITIS SEEM QUITE WILLING TO SEE THE EXECUTIVE RETAIN FOR SOME TIME THE EXTRAORDINARY POWERS WHICH IT ASSUMED ON AUGUST 29, 1976. MEANWHILE, BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DISCUSSION OF CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM HAS BEGUN, AS THE AMIR PROMISED LAST FEBRUARY. END SUMMARY.

2. CALM CONTINUES. AT THE END OF AUGUST 1976, DURING THE DOLDRUMS OF RAMADAN, THE AMIR OF KUWAIT UNEXPECTEDLY RETURNED FROM VACATION IN ENGLAND TO SIGN DECREES DISSOLVING THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY, SUSPENDING A NUMBER OF CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS PROVIDING FOR LEGISLATIVE POWER AND LIMITING EXECUTIVE POWER, AND AUTHORIZING THE MINISTRY OF CONFIDENTIAL

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INFORMATION TO CLAMP DOWN ON THE PRESS. KUWAITI SOCIETY WAS SURPRISED BY THIS BOLD ASSUMPTION OF WIDER EXECUTIVE POWERS, WHICH HAVE SINCE BEEN EXERCISED PRINCIPALLY BY THE CABINET (COUNCIL OF MINISTERS), BUT MOST OF KUWAIT HAS HUMMED ALONG WITH BUSINESS AS USUAL. THE BURGEONING ECONOMY SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN UNAFFECTED AND OPEN DISSIDENCE HAS BEEN VERY LIMITED. THOSE WHO USED THE PRESS TO PROTEST THE AMIR'S SURPRISE DECREES WERE SILENCED WITHIN A FEW DAYS, AND MOST OTHER DISSIDENTS, WHO REPORTEDLY JOINED TO ISSUE A CRITICAL PAMPHLET, LOST THEIR OFFICIALLY-RECOGNIZED LEADERSHIP POSITIONS IN PROFESSIONAL GROUPS WITHOUT EVEN AN AUDIBLE WHIMPER. ALSO, THE LEFTISTS WHO LEAD THE KUWAITI LABOR MOVEMENT WERE ARRESTED, THEN FREED, AND APPARENTLY PERSUADED TO KEEP SILENT ABOUT DOMESTIC POLITICS.

3. ADDITIONAL AFTERSHOCKS. POLITICAL AFTERSHOCKS, FOLLOWING THE MAJOR QUAKE OF AUGUST 1976, HAVE TAPERED OFF. WE HAD UNDERSTOOD THAT LEADERS OF ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL GROUPS MIGHT BE REPLACED, BUT THIS DID NOT HAPPEN. HOWEVER, THE PRINCIPAL KUWAITI POLITICAL CLUB, THE LEFT-LEANING ISTIQLAL CLUB, WAS FINALLY CLOSED DOWN BY

GOVERNMENT ORDER IN JULY 1977. WE KNOW THAT THE PRESS WAS SUFFERING FROM A CASE OF NERVES DURING THE FALL OF 1976, BECAUSE OF THE LACK OF CLEAR GUIDELINES AS TO WHAT WAS FIT TO PRINT. AFTER ITS EXPERIENCE WITH THE RELATIVELY MILD GOK STANCE IN THIS RESPECT, HOWEVER, TENSION IN THE PRESS HAS DECREASED AND DAILY NEWS COVERAGE IS BECOMING A BIT MORE ADVENTUROUS AND CONTROVERSIAL. THE PRESS AND DISSIDENTS ARE STILL CAREFULLY WATCHED, BUT OTHERWISE THERE HAVE BEEN FEW RESTRICTIONS WHICH IMPEDE THE NORMAL COURSE OF LIFE OR THE GENERAL FREEDOM ENJOYED BY THE AVERAGE KUWAITI. THE ONLY NOTABLE RECENT PRESS RESTRICTION WAS THE THREE MONTH SUSPENSION (ON SEPT. 21, 1977) OF AL-AMEL, THE FORTNIGHTLY KUWAIT WORKERS CONFEDERATION MAGAZINE, APPARENTLY FOR PUBLISHING A PROPAGANDISTIC CONFIDENTIAL

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ARTICLE HIGHLY LAUDATORY OF THE LIBYAN "RESOLUTION," WHICH WAS PROBABLY DISTASTEFUL TO KUWAITI OFFICIALS AND SOME OTHER ARAB GOVERNMENTS.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 3 KUWAIT 5419

4. FACTORS FOR STABILITY. IN OUR ESTIMATION, THE RULING FAMILY AND ITS GOVERNMENT REMAIN AS RESPECTED AND STRONG AS BEFORE AUGUST 1976 -- ANY POLITICAL DISABILITIES OR DISAFFECTION IT HAS INCURRED SINCE THAT TIME PROBABLY ARE OUTWEIGHED BY THE CUMULATIVE DOMESTIC ADVANTAGES OF THE APPARENT END TO THE CIVIL WAR IN LEBANON AND PUBLIC ACCEPTANCE OF THE FAMILY'S FIRM RULE. THE FOLLOWING FACTORS ALSO HAVE COMBINED TO BRING ABOUT CONTINUED STABILITY IN KUWAIT:

A. SABAH PRESTIGE. THE SABAH FAMILY, MEMBERS OF WHICH
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HAVE RULED KUWAIT FOR OVER TWO CENTURIES AND WHICH STILL HOLDS MANY KEY GOVERNMENTAL POSITIONS, HAS GREAT PRESTIGE IN KUWAIT. THE GENERAL ASSUMPTION IS THAT THERE IS NO ACCEPTABLE SUBSTITUTE FOR THIS LARGE RULING FAMILY, THE CENTRAL, MODERATE LEADERSHIP FORCE. KUWAITIS LOOK ABOUT THEM IN THE GULF AND SEE THAT THEY ARE BETTER OFF MAN-FOR-MAN THAN ANY OF THEIR OIL-RICH NEIGHBORS, A SITUATION FOR WHICH CONSIDERABLE CREDIT IS ASCRIBED TO THE FARSIGHTEDNESS AND MODERATION OF THE SABAHS. HENCE, THERE IS A GENERAL FAITH THAT THE RULERS KNEW WHAT THEY WERE DOING WHEN THEY SUSPENDED THE CONSTITUTION, ETC.

B. CONSENSUS VALUED OVER DEMOCRACY. WHILE THERE WAS EVIDENT PRIDE IN KUWAIT AS A PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY, THE KUWAITI "INTELLIGENTSIA" IS HIGHLY PRAGMATIC AND NON-IDEOLOGICAL. SOME VALUES WHICH WE HOLD DEAR (CONSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY, FOR EXAMPLE) ARE NOT WIDELY TREASURED IN KUWAIT, THOUGH MOST KUWAITIS MIGHT CONCUR THAT THEY ARE DESIRABLE IN THE ABSTRACT. WESTERN POLITICAL IDEAS ARE NOT AT PRESENT STRONG DETERMINANTS OF POLITICAL ACTION. RATHER, TRIBAL LOYALTIES AND CUSTOMS, FAMILY TIES, RELIGION, AND MODERN ECONOMIC MOTIVATIONS SEEM TO BE THE PRINCIPAL IDEAS GUIDING KUWAITIS, BOTH RULERS AND PEOPLE. FEATURES OF TRADITIONAL BEDOUIN RULE BY CONSENSUS, WHEREBY THE RULERS RESPOND TO COMMUNITY NEEDS AND THE DESIRES OF KEY PERSONALTIES, ARE VERY MUCH IN EFFECT IN KUWAIT. A GOOD ARGUMENT CAN BE MADE, THEREFORE, THAT WHAT THE AMIR DID A YEAR AGO SERVED WELL BOTH TRADITIONAL SOCIAL VALUES AND THE HEALTH OF THE MODERN MARKETPLACE, AT LEAST IN THE SHORT TERM. THE LACK OF A COUNTER ARGUMENT, INTELLIGIBLE TO MOST KUWAITIS, CONTRIBUTED TO THEIR

ACQUIESCENCE IN THE AMIR'S ACTIONS.

C. OPPOSITION COOPTED. IT IS AXIOMATIC THAT KUWAIT'S WEALTH COOPTS MOST WILD-EYED YOUTHS THAT KUWAIT PRODUCES. CONFIDENTIAL

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THE LURE OF YACHTS, BIT HOUSES, AND HOLIDAYS IN LONDON OR LAS VEGAS SEEMS TO HAVE PERSUADED OTHERWISE WOULD-BE RADICALS TO TAKE AN INTEREST IN MAKING MONEY OR AT LEAST TO AVOID STIRRING UP POLITICAL TROUBLE. ALSO, THIS MAY WELL HAVE BEEN A FACTOR IN THE TOTAL SILENCE WHICH THE TRADITIONALLY LEFTIST LEADERS OF THE KUWAIT WORKERS CONFEDERATION (KWC) HAVE MAINTAINED SINCE LAST SEPTEMBER, WHEN THEY WERE ARRESTED (AND THEN LET OUT ON BAIL) FOR EXERCISING THEIR FREEDOM OF SPEECH AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT. APPARENTLY THEY HAVE RETAINED THEIR JOBS IN RETURN FOR CONTINUED SILENCE, A SILENCE MAINTAINED EVEN WHEN THEY TRAVEL OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY. THEY ARE OTHER REASONS FOR THE DECLINE OF THE KUWAITI LEFT, WHICH ARE BEING REPORTED SEPARATELY.

D. RESTRICTIONS FINE-TUNED. THE GOVERNMENT HAS ALSO BEEN CAREFUL TO EXERCISE DISCRETION IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ITS NEW DECREES (AND PRIOR LAWS) AGAINST DISSENT. AS FAR AS WE ARE AWARE, NO PERSON HAS BEEN DEPORTED NOR SENTENCED TO PRISON FOR VIOLATING NATIONAL SECURITY LAWS SINCE AUGUST. SOME PASSPORTS OF PERSONS CRITICAL OF THE GOK HAVE BEEN LIFTED, HOWEVER, AND BOTH FOREIGN SCHOLARSHIPS AND ATTENDANCE BY KUWAITIS AT INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES HAVE BEEN BROUGHT UNDER GOVERNMENT CONTROL (REF C). REGARDING THE PRESS, EXCEPT AS NOTED ABOVE, THE MINISTRY OF INFORMATION LATELY HAS ISSUED MERE LETTERS OF REPRIMAND TO VIOLATORS OF PRESS RESTRICTIONS. THE GOVERNMENT APPARENTLY HAS RELAXED ITS OWN RULES OCCASIONALLY ON PRESS COVERAGE CRITICAL OF FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS, THUS GIVING THE PRESS SOME ADDITIONAL LEEWAY. IN ITS DEALINGS WITH OTHER DISSIDENT OR POTENTIALLY DISSIDENT OPINION LEADERS, THE GOVERNMENT HAS ALSO USED DISCRETION AND A SOFT APPROACH, AS IN THE APPARENT BARGAIN STRUCK WITH THE KWC LEADERSHIP LAST YEAR. MOREOVER, DELIBERATE LEGAL PROCEDURES HAVE BEEN USED (OR OSTENSIBLY USED) IN EVERY CASE OF "PUNISHMENT" OCCASIONED BY UNAUTHORIZED POLITICAL ACTIVITY. THE LEGAL FORMS HAVE BEEN MAINTAINED.

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E. PERCEPTION OF CONSERVATIVE ARAB TREND? THERE MAY
ALSO BE A KIND OF FATALISM AT WORK ON THOSE POLITICAL
DISSENTERS IN KUWAIT WHO ARE CONSCIOUS OF MIDDLE EAST POLI-
TICAL TRENDS. THE RISE OF SAUDI PRESTIGE IN THE LAST FEW
YEARS, ALONG WITH THE DURABILITY OF THE JORDANIAN REGIME
AND RELATIVELY CONSERVATIVE OR MODERATE COURSES FOLLOWED
IN EGYPT, SYRIA AND BAHRAIN, MAY HAVE TAKEN SOME OF THE WIND
OUT OF THEIR SAILS. WE ALSO CONTINUE TO HEAR THAT KUWAITI
LAWS ARE TO BE EXAMINED AND AMENDED ACROSS THE BOARD TO
CONFORM TO TRADITIONAL ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES.
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5. DISCUSSION OF CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM. THE AMIR HAS

BEEN TRUE TO HIS UNDERTAKING OF LAST FEBRUARY 25, TO BEGIN "NECESSARY CONSULTATIONS FOR ISSUING A DECREE FORMING A COMMITTEE WHICH WILL STUDY REVISION OF THE CONSTITUTION" (REF B). IN APRIL, HE ASKED THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS TO RECOMMEND CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES TO HIM, WHICH GAVE IMPETUS TO A RATHER LIVELY STRING OF COMMENTARY IN THE PRESS ABOUT NEEDED CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES. APPARENTLY, HOWEVER, IT IS STILL NOT VERY CLEAR TO ANYONE JUST WHAT THE AMIR WANTS FOR THE COUNCIL, AND APPARENTLY LITTLE PROGRESS WAS MADE BEFORE THE GOVERNMENT ENTERED ITS SUMER SOMNOLENCE. MOREOVER, IN A SPEECH LAST SPRING, THE CROWN PRINCE/PRIME MINISTER INVITED "ALL CITIZENS OR GROUPS TO COME FORWARD AND SUBMIT THEIR IDEAS AND PROPOSALS TO THE CABINET ABOUT THE RESTORATION OF PARLIAMENTARY LIFE IN KUWAIT." AND A NUMBER OF INTELLECTUALLY INCLINED KUWAITIS HAVE SPOKEN UP IN NEWS ARTICLES AND INTERVIEWS. WHILE THERE ARE NO CLEAR TRENDS OF THOUGH YET EXPRESSED, THERE HAVE BEEN SOME NOVEL IDEAS PRONOUNCED (I.E., GIVING WOEMEN THE VOTE, ESTABLISHING A BICAMERAL ASSEMBLY, REQUIRING A COLLEGE DEGREE TO SERVE IN THE ASSEMBLY, ETC.).

5. THESE APPROACHES TO CONSTITUTIONAL REVISION MAY APPEAR UNORTHODOX TO SOME, BUT THEY ARE IN LINE WITH THE PRE-CONSTITUTION KUWAITI TRADITION OF CONSULTATIONS BETWEEN RULERS AND RULED ON VITAL COMMUNITY QUESTIONS. ALSO, THE CROWN PRINCE'S INVITATION TO THE PUBLIC HAS GIVEN BROADER LICENSE TO THOSE CITIZENS WHO HAVE WANTED TO EXPRESS THEIR VIEWS PUBLICLY ON BASIC QUESTIONS OF GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION. AS QUIET PUBLIC DEBATE OVER CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES CONTINUES, HOWEVER, IT

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IS WORTH NOTING THAT NO DEADLINES HAVE YET BEEN FIXED FOR ACCOMPLISHING ANYTHING CONCRETE IN THE WAY OF ACTUALLY WRITING NEW DRAFT CONSTITUTIONAL REVISIONS.
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